

Alison Brown

Oral History Interview

Interviewed by Mark Coltrain

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Wilkes Community College

Wilkesboro, North Carolina

Project - MerleFest Oral Histories

Mark Coltrain (00:00):

All right. So we are here. It is April the 29th, 2002. Um, I am here with Alison, Alison Brown, and we, um, are at, uh, the campus of Wilkes Community College, uh at the MerleFest music festival. So thank you again. Um, will you please just sort of, to start off, just describe a, a little bit about your music.

Alison Brown (00:22):

Um, well, my music is interesting because I'm a, a, a five string banjo player. And I started off playing bluegrass music. So everything I do has a foot in bluegrass. And I play, I like to take Earl Scruggs' three finger style and, and go in some different kind of musical directions with it. So it's a little bit of a hybrid, maybe one foot in bluegrass and one foot in kind of like pop jazz. Um, yeah, and then I like a little explorations into world music and folk music and all the kinds of things under the big musical tent of folk music, I suppose.

Mark Coltrain (00:51):

Great, thank you. Um, so, um, what's your, if you have one, what's your favorite memory of either MerleFest or the, the Watson family?

Alison Brown (01:00):

Yeah, I have so many memories. Um, I'll give you... Can I give you one of each?

Mark Coltrain (01:05):

Sure, absolutely.

Alison Brown (01:06):

And I don't even know if I could give you one favorite memory of MerleFest. But to me, the thing that's so beautiful about roots music and... and MerleFest illustrates this better than just about any festival I can think of... is that it's an inter-generational music. And it's very family friend, friendly. And I think that that's a, an amazing thing. And it's not, you know, to be taken for granted 'cause there, other genres don't have this. But roots music is really fortunate to.

(01:33):

And so, you know, over the years, like, I've, we've brought our kids to MerleFest. But before we had kids we obviously didn't. But I, I was thinking specifically of, um, the year I was pregnant with my daughter, uh, in 2002, playing MerleFest and playing on the main stage with you know, like, my banjo slung over to the side. And then, well, you know, the years after that, we would always bring our kids up on stage. And so I really feel that they've grown up coming to MerleFest and have gone fishing at B's house. You know, didn't catch the big carp, but, but that was like an awesome experience.

(02:04):

And so it's just amazing to be part of a community where you can, like, raise the next generation through the music and through the community. I think it really makes the roots of this music strong and makes the community really strong and solid.

Mark Coltrain (02:18):

Great, thank you. And was there one about the Watson family that you wanted to share as well?

Alison Brown (02:22):

Sure, sure. I don't know the Watson family per se, but I was totally fortunate to get to do some shows with Doc.

Mark Coltrain (02:28):

Mm-hmm.

Alison Brown (02:29):

And, um, our band opened for Doc on several occasions. And, um, it kind of goes back to that family thing. As you know, I mean Doc was just such a gentle soul. And my favorite memory is being able to sit with him in his dressing room back stage after one show. I think we might've been in Wisconsin. And my daughter was... Um, I even have a picture I can show you. She was probably, you know, three months old. And Doc just held Hannah, my daughter, and sang her these old songs that I'd never heard, like, before or, or again, that sounded like they were 500 years old. He just held her and sang to her for half an hour. And, um, I wish it had been in the age of iPhone 'cause I would have it to show you. But, uh, to me, that really encapsulated Doc. He was just like this connected, this connection to our musical past. But also just such a gentle soul. He always said to me, "You're a good momma, Alison."

Mark Coltrain (03:30):

(laughs) Great, thank you for that.

Alison Brown (03:31):

Yeah.

Mark Coltrain (03:32):

Um, so, uh, a theme of MerleFest is obviously the homecoming. So why do you think that is, um, for both fans and musicians?

Alison Brown (03:41):

Um, I think it goes back to that question for, just like the other question. I think it goes back to the fact that, that there's a, a really strong community that's built on a very solid foundation. And I think just as our family, our kids have grown up here, other people kind of s- have seen their lives through the lens of many MerleFests over many years. So I think we all feel a connection to it. Sometimes when I'm standing back stage and it's night time and I'm looking at like the big trees, I almost feel like we could be at like a, a, like a highland clan gathering.

Mark Coltrain (04:12):

Hm.

Alison Brown (04:12):

You know, in 1700s in Scotland or something. That's what it feels like to me.

Mark Coltrain (04:16):

Right.

Alison Brown (04:17):

It's like all the different, you know, families coming together and celebrating under the stars and, in this beautiful setting.

Mark Coltrain (04:24):

Yeah.

Alison Brown (04:24):

This music that has, you know, roots that even extend before that.

Mark Coltrain (04:27):

Yeah, what a lovely image. Thank you.

Alison Brown (04:28):

Yeah.

Mark Coltrain (04:29):

Yeah. Um, did I cut you off there? I'm sorry.

Alison Brown (04:31):

No, no, that's, um, I hope that didn't ramble too much.

Mark Coltrain (04:34):

No, no, no, it's, it's perfect. Thank you. Um, so can you talk a little bit about how you first got involved with the festival? Um, and maybe even memories of your first performance here?

Alison Brown (04:45):

Sure. Yeah, my first MerleFest was as a member of Alison Krauss and Union Station. We played the second MerleFest, um, when it was still, like, flatbed truck stage. And, um, yeah, I mean, I, I just remember that very clearly, uh, getting to stand on that flatbed stage. And the festival was just this little bitty festival. And then just we played, you know, you know, every year, every other year, pretty much since then over many many years. It's amazing to see how it's grown.

Mark Coltrain (05:12):

Great.

Alison Brown (05:12):

That's where it started for me.

Mark Coltrain (05:14):

Great, thank you. And how has it, um, impacted your music career?

Alison Brown (05:18):

Um, well, you know, it just, I guess it's all just coming back to community for me. You know? It's, it's a chance to visit with, you know, friends and fellow musicians. And fans isn't really the right, right word because the ecosystem for this music it's, it's not really about fans over there and musicians over here. It's really about all of us together. And like, we can't have the ecosystem of this music without everybody doing their part. So it's, yeah, it's a chance to see people that have been coming to our shows at MerleFest since before, you know, I had my kids. And seeing their kids. And, you know, it's that clan gathering idea, for me, I guess.

Mark Coltrain (05:55):

Mm-hmm, great. Yeah, some of the, um, other interviews that I've had thus far um, the sort of, the exchanges among musicians has come up a lot. That theme, um, of sometimes it's somewhat random and someone, sometimes it's planned. But, like, musicians sort of learning from each other, also, is sort of a happy, sort of, um, sort of occurrence that happens here. Is that something that you've experienced, where you connect with other musicians? Maybe by happenstance or by, via plan to do it? But s- sort of organic things happen, uh, with that, um, with your performance?

Alison Brown (06:26):

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think, you know, it's, it's a function of how busy, like, people can tend to be pretty busy running back and forth between stages. And in the early days it was much more like that when we were just like running at a dead run, like for four days. And then at the end you might see people. But it seems like it's a little bit more calm now. And there are opportunities, certainly. Like on our show today, Sierra Hull sat in and I'm gonna sit in our her set this, this evening. So-

Mark Coltrain (06:51):

Great.

Alison Brown (06:52):

Um, yeah, it definitely creates opportunities to pull in friends and, and share a tune. And I think that that's, that, I think it's in the word fans. And I think the audience really likes that because that's the magic of live music.

Mark Coltrain (07:03):

Hm.

Alison Brown (07:04):

Is to be, like, witness to a moment that only happened once and can't be repeated.

Mark Coltrain (07:09):

Yeah. Um, so I feel like you, you've probably more than covered this next question, wh- what performing, what makes performing here special? But maybe the second part, why have you returned year after year?

Alison Brown (07:22):

Um, well, uh, it's a privilege. I mean, I love playing MerleFest and just love being able to connect with just this scene. You know? With the people that come to watch the music and people that play the music

and all the volunteers that help make it all run so smoothly. And get to see, you know, friends, people that I've known for 30 or 40 years. It's just magical. I, I wouldn't miss it.

Mark Coltrain (07:44):

Great, thank you. Um, so, uh, I guess this is also something that's come up, um, in, in the last couple of days. Um, the year that it wasn't able to happen, back in 2020, because of COVID.

Alison Brown (07:55):

Yeah.

Mark Coltrain (07:56):

Um, did you do anything special around the time of that weekend or on that weekend, um, when you probably would have been here? Is that something that you, you thought about during that time. I know it was somewhat of a stressful time for a lot of people so...

Alison Brown (08:09):

Yeah. Oh, I don't know. Didn't do anything specific. But yeah, it was, you know, getting to come back now.

Mark Coltrain (08:15):

Mm-hmm.

Alison Brown (08:16):

I mean, it's been two years since, obviously, since the pandemic. And I think that it's only through the process of playing for a live audience that you realize how much we lost during that time.

Mark Coltrain (08:26):

Mm-hmm.

Alison Brown (08:27):

And that connection with other humans through music is just such a special thing.

Mark Coltrain (08:31):

Sure.

Alison Brown (08:32):

It's not the same to sit in your room and just-

Mark Coltrain (08:34):

Through Zoom.

Alison Brown (08:35):

By yourself, yes, or even through Zoom. It's just like, yeah, that, that immediate connection with another person is just a natural thing. So-

Mark Coltrain (08:43):

Great.

Alison Brown (08:43):

I'm really glad that we're back.

Mark Coltrain (08:45):

Great, thank you. Um, I referred to COVID in the past tense but it's obviously still with us, so yeah.

Alison Brown (08:50):

Yeah, it obviously is, but...

Mark Coltrain (08:50):

Um, well, so are there any particular rituals or traditions that you do either leading up to the festival or during the festival or right, maybe af- just after?

Alison Brown (09:01):

Oh, well, that's a good question. And I can't think of anything specific. There are a couple little restaurants in town that we like to hit if we get a chance.

Mark Coltrain (09:11):

Hm.

Alison Brown (09:11):

And, uh, I always think about the early days when Krispy Kreme doughnuts was our sponsor.

Mark Coltrain (09:16):

Yeah.

Alison Brown (09:16):

And my parents came from the west coast and my mom is a total devotee to Krispy Kreme 'cause they couldn't get it out west back in those days. And I just remember the boxes of Krispy Kreme doughnuts as being a good ritual. And actually any time that I have a Krispy Kreme doughnut now I think of MerleFest.

Mark Coltrain (09:33):

(laughs) That's great. Um, so can you, and you, I think you touched on this some as well. But if there's anything else to expand upon it, um, describing your relationship with Doc, um, and/or the festival and sort of how it, how it sort of evolved from those early years.

Alison Brown (09:47):

Mm-hmm- um, yeah, I, well, that's a really good question. I'm trying to think of, like, the first time that I saw Doc Watson was at the San Diego Folk Festival.

Mark Coltrain (09:59):

Hm.

Alison Brown (09:59):

And it would've been around in the mid-70s. And, um, my friend and picking buddy, Stewart Duncan, his band was opening for Doc and Merle. And his band, Pain in the Grass, was opening for those guys. And so they invited me to go along. And, you know, just, like, getting to see Doc play live and then just like getting to even watch him in the dressing room, just, like, you know, sitting back stage and waiting for his time to go on, it's jut really magical to me. Because I grew up in California. And so I'm kind of an outsider to this music in a way. Um, and Doc is, like, one of, like, the torch bearers of the roots of the music and is very much part of the culture that the music came out of. And so, for me, you know, being around Doc, it, it, I, it's hard not to feel like an interloper in a way. It's like, because he is so real and, and what he plays and sings is just, it's so genuine. You know? And what I play is, and, and do, you know, maybe borrows from, like, the roots of, of what Doc does. But it's not, you know, it doesn't drink from the same spring as 100% the way Doc does, or Doc did.

Mark Coltrain (11:08):

Hm.

Alison Brown (11:09):

Um, so, you know, just being around him was always, it's hard not to be star struck. But then like I mentioned, he was always just so gentle and always so kind. And I remember playing, um, doing a set called Girls for Merle. Which I think B Towns organized that a couple of years. It was like all female band with Doc sitting in. And I remember rehearsing that at the Walker Center and, um, playing a banjo solo. And Doc saying, "That's some good banjo picking, Alison."

Mark Coltrain (11:34):

(laughs)

Alison Brown (11:35):

(laughs) And I would give anything to have that, a recording of that. But just, you know, MerleFest gave me the opportunity to be around a musical giant like that. And to be able to, like, come into his dressing room and hand over, you know, my son or whatever and just, like, you know, watch Doc with, with my kids. That really is special to me. And it's something, it's a, a huge important piece of musical history that I hope that they can carry into their futures.

Mark Coltrain (12:02):

Yeah, I think. I'm a little, y- you mentioned feeling like an outsider or an interloper. You're obviously not, now. I mean, and maybe, maybe you felt that way at one time. So was there a moment that you, that that changed, where you felt more of like an insider? Or do you still feel, do you still have that feeling?

Alison Brown (12:17):

Well, it's an interesting thing because bluegrass banjo picking, I mean, comes from southern Appalachia.

Mark Coltrain (12:22):

Hm.

Alison Brown (12:22):

And people who grow up playing that, the music in this part of the country, their approach to the music is different. It's more free and open and, you know, kind of including, like lots of different influences in California that the, the parameters aren't as narrow. Um, but I don't know. I've spent, like, most of my adult life living in the s- in the southeast now. So I guess maybe I'm a little bit less of an interloper. But, you know, it, it's different, I think, than if you're raised in this culture. Because I've always been enamored of this, of the south.

Mark Coltrain (12:53):

Mm-hmm.

Alison Brown (12:54):

And the culture, I find it just so fascinating. I think it's different to look at it as somebody who didn't grow up in it, um, than to be somebody who did.

Mark Coltrain (13:02):

Great, thank you, thank you for that. Um, well, we have, we have, uh, gotten through our questions very quickly. So, um, is there anything else that might be relevant to this conversation that you'd like to share that we haven't covered?

Alison Brown (13:21):

Hm, I don't know. Nothing's really coming to mind but I'm glad to sit and talk if you have other questions.

Mark Coltrain (13:21):

Okay, well-

Alison Brown (13:21):

If you're trying to figure it out.

Mark Coltrain (13:24):

No, the, um, I mean, these, these are sort of the, the standard ones that we've been asking, uh, people. I'd, well, there is one that that has come up, um, a little bit today. And I will ask this of you as well. Um, do you remember, um, the first festival, uh, after Doc died? Um, do, can you, can you recreate that? Were you, um, what was that like? Um, do you remember any particular special performances?

Alison Brown (13:47):

Did he pass away in 2012?

Mark Coltrain (13:48):

2012, that's correct. So I don't know if you performed in 2013 or, um...

Alison Brown (13:53):

That's a good question. I don't remember specific- I don't remember that festival specifically.

Mark Coltrain (13:58):

Okay.

Alison Brown (13:58):

I'm sure I would've missed not seeing him in his dressing room. But, yeah, I mean, it's, it a, I, I feel so incredibly fortunate and knowing that the musicians that come after me won't have the opportunity to interact on any kind of personal level with the giants that created this music.

Mark Coltrain (14:17):

Right.

Alison Brown (14:18):

And I was, you know, fortunate with Doc and Earl Scruggs and-

Mark Coltrain (14:21):

Mm-hmm.

Alison Brown (14:22):

Just giants like that. I mean, I can't believe I got to be in the same room with them ever and yet I did. And it just enriched me as a person and as a musician more than I could really put words to.

Mark Coltrain (14:33):

Do you remember the last time you saw Doc perform at MerleFest?

Alison Brown (14:36):

Hm, I don't remember that specifically.

Mark Coltrain (14:40):

Okay, great, all right. Well, thank you. Um, um, that, that, that covers it. So, um, thank you for-

Alison Brown (14:46):

You're welcome.

Mark Coltrain (14:46):

For, for your, your candor and, you know, your stories. I really appreciate it.

Alison Brown (14:50):

You're welcome.

